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Periyar a Social Reformer

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Abstract

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy was a person who was ever obliging to non-Brahmin. He was simple and understanding. He would never ever give trouble to non-Brahmins and always had a big ambition. He was interested in the problems of others, especially the women, and spent time to help them. He loved being with the poor and to do social service and thus be of help and consolation to poor people. He was an intelligent, simple, obedient, hardworking, committed and an enthusiastic social reformer. He had achieved remarkable feat by competing with Brahmanism.

Key words – Non-Brahmanism, Vaikom, Viduthalai, Periyarism, untouchability, Self-Respect.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy was a person who has done yeoman's service to the non-Brahmins. He was humble and compassionate. He toiled for the welfare of the non-Brahmins and had lofty ambitions for the upliftment of society. He was keen on addressing varied social issues, especially concerning the women, and spent time helping them. He worked towards improving the living conditions of the poor and the downtrodden. He was an intelligent, humble, diligent, dedicated and zealous social reformer. He achieved the remarkable feat of exposing and redressing the fallacies of Brahmanism.

In the whole of Tamil Nadu and even far beyond, the honorific Periyar indicates the name of a great twentieth-century social reformer from Erode, Venkata Naicker Ramasamy, popularly known as 'Thanthai Periyar'. The UNESCO awarded him a citation on 27 January 1970, calling him the 'Socrates of South India'.[1] The Government of India issued a postal stamp in memory of Periyar in 1978. The Government of Malaysia issued a stamp commemorating Periyar's 137th birthday on 19 January 2014, in Kualalumpur.[2] Periyar and his laurels are an inspiration for any social reformer

Periyar was born to rich orthodox Vaishnava parents in Erode on 17 September 1879. He was a truant at school and a rebel incarnate at home. He had only four or five years of formal schooling following which he discontinued his education. However, he had sound common sense and was worldly-wise. His rational bearing made him a non-conformist and a heretic Soon, his father retired from the wholesale grocery trade and saddled young Ramasamy with the business. This was an opportunity for young Ramasamy to show his talent and shrewdness. However, drifting to business

did not alter his unorthodox and rebellious behaviour. His radical disposition earned him the ire of his father. Unable to bear his father's wrath and punitive measures, Ramasamy ran out of Erode to the north of India in search of an independent career. He went to Benares incognito and somehow returned to Erode after a gap of a few months.[3] Here, he became more familiar with the Hindu tenets and sought to implement the same in his Self-Respect Movement.

It was Mr. C. Rajagopalachary who induced Periyar to join the Indian National Congress party where he found it difficult to withstand for more than five years. The hegemony of the privileged classes in the Congress party was unbearable to him. But still, he rose to become the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress in 1922. He served as Municipal Chairman of Erode in 1917 and proved his mettle as an honest service-oriented leader.[4] He continued to head various public organisations such as schools, banks and chambers of commerce in Erode. He proved himself as a man of integrity, impartiality and uprightness in all the offices he held. Surprisingly, he was also a trustee of a few temples and administered them well. On a request from local leaders, such as George Joseph and T.K. Madhavan, who were involved in a civil rights agitation for the harijans right to walk on the streets around a local temple, Periyar went to Vaikom in Kerala in April 1924. Presently, a statue of Periyar in Vaikom commemorates his outstanding work there.[5] He also worked for the abolition of the sale of toddy and got imprisoned at Erode. This was much appreciated by Gandhiji whom he met in Bangalore in 1927.[6]

Periyar championed the prohibition of alcoholic beverages so ardently that at one stage his sister and wife too jumped into the fray and went to jail. Protesting against the hegemony of the privileged classes in the Congress party, Periyar championed the cause of backward and scheduled castes by quitting the party and started the Self Respect Movement on the plank of rationalism in the late twenties of the last century.[7] The Justice party, a socio-political outfit, that stood for the welfare of non-Brahmins and their constitutional and human rights sought the support of Periyar. He was elected as its President when he was serving his jail term. Soon after his release, he integrated the Justice Party with the Self-Respect Movement and started the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 with the aim to eradicate casteism, superstition and rituals and for promulgating equality, remarriage of widows, women's education and communal representation in job opportunities. As expected, vested interests, orthodox and higher castes opposed him tooth and nail. But Periyar swam against these cross currents and sternly upheld his views.[8] He toured European countries and visited Russia in 1932. He appreciated the communist maxim and wrote very highly of it in *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai*, the journals that he edited and published. Earlier in 1930, Periyar translated Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto in the pages of *Kudi Arasu*. He also published an outright condemnation of the British for having executed Bhagat Singh, the hero of Punjab.[9]

Periyar severely criticised the Puranas, scriptures and mythologies and wanted scientific temper to be inculcated among the masses. With respect to language and medium of instruction, he feared the domination of Hindi and opposed its imposition. The rank and file of his party stood by him in all the ups and downs of his life. In disseminating his revolutionary thoughts and opinions, Periyar visited every nook and corner of Tamil Nadu and addressed the rural gatherings in hundred thousand meetings. His informal and colloquial style Tamil lectures inspired the rural masses. People thronged in thousands to listen to him with eagerness and discipline.[10] Never did he seek the help of rich men

and aristocrats. Known for his frugality, he led a simple life and wanted his followers to do the same. He was neither a theist nor an agnostic, but an outright atheist.

Periyar shunned politics, and at one time, when he was offered in 1940 a chance to form the State Ministry of Tamil Nadu twice by the British Government, he politely declined it on both occasions. He felt that socio-economic freedom is more important for the country than political freedom. This opinion of Periyar, along with his platonic marriage, made the young proteges of the outfit leave him to organise a new political party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in 1948. Periyar did not bother about the dissent of his lieutenants but ploughed his lonely furrow until his last breath on 24 December 1973. He died a nonagenarian and a symbol of atheism, radicalism and social reformation.

The Dravidar Kazhagam founded by him still continues to be at the forefront of social reform and never gets into electoral politics. Periyar’s life’s earnings have been made into a philanthropic trust which presently runs about 40 institutions, including an eponymous Deemed University at Thanjavur. His outstanding and versatile disciple Dr. K. Veeramani has been disseminating Periyarism in the USA, Europe and South Asian countries. A publication unit founded by Periyar has so far brought out more than a hundred titles in Tamil and English and a few titles in French, Hindi, Telugu and Malayalam.

Principles and legacy

Periyar spent over fifty years giving speeches, propagating the realisation that everyone is an equal citizen and that differences based on caste and creed were man-made to keep the innocent and ignorant as underdogs in society. Although Periyar's speeches were targeted towards the illiterate and more mundane masses, scores of educated people were also swayed. Periyar viewed reasoning as a special tool. According to him, all are blessed with this tool, but very few use it. Thus, Periyar used reasoning to substantiate his social criticism and to win over the masses. Communal discrimination in Tamil society was a deep-rooted evil until Periyar burst into the scene.

Rationalism

The bedrock of Periyar’s principles and the movements he started was rationalism. It was the practice of treating reason as the ultimate authority in religion.[11] He realised that an insignificant minority in the society was exploiting the majority and was perpetually subjugating them. He desired to create an awakening among the exploited. He wanted the exploited to use their reason to realise the oppression and the unfair treatment meted out to them. He hoped that the oppressed would start thinking and realise that they too are human beings like the rest, and that birth did not and should not endow superiority over others; they must awaken themselves and do everything possible to improve their lot.

Likewise, Periyar explained that wisdom lies in thinking and that the spearhead of thinking is rationalism. On caste, he stated that no other living being harms or degrades its own class. But man, said to be a rational living being, perpetuates these evils. The discrimination, parochialism, animosity and socio-economic inequality prevalent in the society were due to a lack of wisdom and rationalism among the masses and not due to God or Fate. His disdain for the rampant social malice made Periyar write in his books and magazines and voice on numerable occasions that the British rule is far better than self-rule.[12]

Periyar also blamed the capitalists for their control of machinery and thus creating difficulties for the proletarians. According to his philosophy, rationalism, which has to lead the way for peaceful life for all, had resulted in causing poverty and worries to the people because of dominating forces. He stated that there is no use in simply acquiring titles or amassing wealth if one is devoid of self-respect or scientific knowledge. An example he gave was the West sending messages to the planets, while the Tamil society in India was offering rice and cereals to their dead forefathers through the Brahmins.

In a message to the Brahmin community, Periyar stated, 'in the name of god, religion, and sastras you have duped us. We were the ruling people. Stop this life of cheating us from this year. Give room for rationalism and humanism'. He added that 'any opposition not based on rationalism, science, or experience will one day or another, reveal the fraud, selfishness, lies and conspiracies'.[13]

Self-Respect

Periyar's philosophy of self-respect was based on his image of a universally accepted ideal world. His philosophy preaches that human action should be based on rational thinking. Furthermore, he professes that the instinct of human beings is to examine every object and action and even nature with a spirit of inquiry and to refuse to submit to anything irrational as equivalent to slavery. Thus, the philosophy of self-respect taught that human actions should be guided by reason, the right and the wrong should be determined by rational thinking and conclusions drawn from reason should be respected under all circumstances. Freedom means respecting all thoughts and actions considered 'right' by human beings based on 'reason'. There is not much difference between 'freedom' and 'self-respect'.[14]

Periyar's foremost appeal to people was to develop self-respect. He preached that the Brahmins had monopolised and cheated other communities for decades and deprived them of their self-respect. He pointed out that most Brahmins claimed to belong to a 'superior' community with the coveted and hereditary privilege of being in charge of temples and performing archanas. He felt that they were trying to reassert their control over religion by using their superior caste status to retain their exclusive privilege to touch idols or enter the sanctum sanctorum.

Women's Rights

As a rationalist and ardent social reformer, Periyar advocated zealously throughout his life that women should be given their legitimate position in society as equals to men, and that they should be given a good education and property rights. He thought age and social customs were not a bar in marrying women. He was keen that women should realise their rights and be worthy citizens of their country.

Periyar fought against the orthodox traditions of marriage that suppressed women in Tamil Nadu and the Indian sub-continent.[15] Though arranged marriages were meant to enable a couple to live together throughout life, it was a veiled manipulation to enslave women. Much worse was the practice of child marriages practised throughout India at the time. It was believed that it would be a sin to marry after puberty. Another practice, which is still prevalent today, is the dowry system where the bride's family is supposed to give the husband a huge payment for the bride. The purpose of this was to financially assist the newly wedded couple, but in many instances, the

tradition was misused by the bridegrooms. The outcome of this abuse was the exploitation of the bride's parents' wealth, and in certain circumstances, led to unfortunate deaths. There have been hundreds of thousands of cases where wives have been murdered, mutilated and burned alive because the father of the bride was unable to make the dowry payment to the husband. Periyar fiercely stood up against this abuse meted out against women.

Women in India also did not have rights to their families' or husbands' property. Periyar fought earnestly for women's right to inherit property and also advocated for women to have the right to separate or divorce their husbands under reasonable circumstances. While birth control still remained taboo in the society of Periyar's time, he advocated it for women's health, population control and the liberation of women from patriarchal appendages.

He criticised the double standards of chastity only for women and argued that it should either be applied to both genders or not at all. Periyar also fought for the abolishment of the Devadasi system. He denounced the Devadasi system as yet another degradation of women by attaching them to temples for the entertainment of others as temple prostitutes. Furthermore, for the liberation of women, Periyar pushed for their right to have an education and the opportunity to join the armed services and the police force.[16]

According to biographer M.D. Gopalakrishnan, Periyar and his movement greatly helped in improving the status of women in Tamil society. Periyar held that, in matters of education and employment, there should be no disparity between men and women. Gopalakrishnan states that Periyar's influence in the State departments and even the Centre made it possible for women to join police departments and the army.

Rural Development

Another area of his social reformation was the upliftment of villages. In a booklet called *Village Uplift*, Periyar pleaded for rural reform. It should be stressed in this context that rural India still forms the largest part of the Indian subcontinent in spite of the ongoing process of urbanisation. Thus, there exists a stark social and economic disparity between rural and urban populations. Periyar wanted to eradicate the concept of 'village' as a derogatory word or place among places just as the concept of an outcast among social groups.[17] Thus Periyar was against discrimination of all kinds, even the discrimination between the rural and urban settings.

Led by his egalitarian ideals, Periyar wanted farm laborers to be called 'partakers in agriculture' and be paid 60 per cent of the income, whereas 40 percent would go to the landowner. In his booklet on rural uplift in 1944, Periyar gave an action programme for modernising villages through the mechanisation of agriculture, that is, ploughing, sowing, digging wells and harvesting by machines. He propagated for the reformulation of agricultural land to facilitate mechanization and separation of land unsuitable for this for growing other crops; marketing of agricultural products, through farmers' cooperative so that the proceeds would go to the agriculturists; combining villages as a small town for provision of a school, hospital, park, cinema, drama, reading room, library, radio station, roads, bus transport, police station, an educated judge and shops; organising mobile exhibitions; establishing courts and providing field camp of officers for redressal of grievances; and establishing small industries. [18]

Periyar and the *Self-Respect Movement* wanted to reduce Government salaries because they spoiled men's integrity. He demanded that industries producing basic amenities and essentials must be state-owned. Furthermore, cooperative societies should be instituted to remove the loan sharks that come between farmers and consumers. Farmers must be helped to get rid of their debts. Litigation and conflicts on account of rules should be reduced and death taxes fixed. Periyar also believed that local boards, municipalities and cooperative managements must be given more power.

In his rural development, he put every stress on education as the sure way to rational thinking and action which would lead to the abolishment of the social and economic injustices in the society. In 1938, as a social reformer, Periyar came up with a fourteen-point programme. They are as follows:[19]

1. The landless agriculturists should be safeguarded from exploitation by landlords and money lenders; the government should do everything to see that agricultural workers are not deprived of their scroll land holdings for defaulting payment of rent.
2. Co-operative societies and banks should be formed to save the farmers from the exorbitant rate of interest collected by pawnbrokers and money lenders.
3. To reduce the number of cases arising out of the dispute of the ownership of land, the Government should possess all clear land documents.
4. The laws pertaining to agriculture should be so framed that the actual agricultural labourers get reasonable returns for their labour; steps must be taken to prevent landlords and the middle-men from cornering away the bulk of the agricultural products.
5. Like railways, post and telegraphs, waterways and electricity which are now under the control of the Government, the other public utilities and services should be taken over by the Government.
6. Insurance schemes should be undertaken by the Government and be extended to workers as in the case of other people.
7. Legislation should be so framed as to increase the public income, as well as the workers, to upgrade their standard of living under income ratio.
8. Children should be given facilities for education within the target period.
9. Considering the baneful influence of toddy and other kinds of drink, the government should work towards total prohibition before a specified period of time.
10. The evils of untouchability, discrimination based on birth, superstition and blind belief should be done away with.
11. State Government appointments should be apportioned according to the percentage of the population and their political aspirations.
12. Land tax should be levied progressively taxing the rich more and leaving the poor from the rigorous clutches of tax.
13. Opportunities to get revenue in the case of local bodies and co-operatives should be enlarged, and the management should be vested with the Government servants.
14. The motto of public administration should aim at efficiency and a good administration with reasonable expenditure.

Periyar sent a copy of these resolutions to the government and political parties, including Congress. The Congress ignored these resolutions owing to their dislike for Periyar and his party. However, the Justice Party accepted these resolutions and assured Periyar that it would implement them when

came to power. The endorsement of the resolutions by the Justice Party was indeed a victory for Periyar's Self-Respect Movement.

Periyar’s vision lives on. Politicians and the common masses continue to identify with his ideals. The existence of the Dravida Kazhagam and Self-Respect Movement still in Tamil Nadu also validates the relevance of his philosophy even decades after his demise. Much of Tamil Nadu’s social progress is indebted to his movement. His progressive thoughts and ideas continue to guide the state even today.

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